

MUTATING IDENTITIES:

CLARICE LISPECTOR'S

UM SOPRO DE VIDA -

PULSAÇÕES AND VIRGINIA

WOOLF'S *BETWEEN THE*

ACTS

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Between the Acts (1941) and *Um Sopro de Vida – Pulsações* (1978), both posthumously published, have been seen by criticism, though in different contexts, as “final stage” works. V. Woolf’s awareness of war and fascism and her project of testing a “new method” (Woolf 1985: 340) in writing, are revealed in her last novel and have been diversely interpreted. John Batchelor, among others, thinks that “this novel refers to and in a way sums up the technical achievements of Woolf’s mature novels” (Batchelor, 1991: 132ss.). Another group of scholars believe that she found a way to criticize political power and literary patriarchal influence (Flora 2002), others think that the novel rejects the modernist beliefs in art as unified and the artist as unifier, considering that such artists and artwork too easily serve the agenda of fascism. (Miller 1994) Some find its conscious faulting of structure as a testing out of the postmodern implications, which suggests not the failure of art or its unifying role but a means of assuring its survival. (Caughie 1991: 51)

Lispector’s novel is one of the two metafictional texts that the author wrote before she died. It deals with the history of an author (referred in the text as the Author) who creates a character, Ângela Pralini, with whom he develops a dialogue. At the same time he analyses Ângela and her writing, as she also becomes a writer. Earl Fitz, one of the most important critics of Lispector’s work, reads the novel as a sort of final confessional outpouring of Lispector’s androgynous creative self, leaving

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aside the issue of sexual difference (Fitz 1985). But this interpretation is questioned by feminist critics as Maria José Barbosa who considers that the book is about a woman writer creating a parody of a male author/narrator who, in his attempt to control his female protagonist is constantly questioned in his literary codes, different of hers, and, of course, constructed to assert the supremacy of the privileged term of the hierarchy. (Barbosa 1991) To the Brazilian critic Olga de Sá, this work is Lispector's poetical autobiography, in which, being exacting with herself she does not constrain and registers every vibration of a taut chord, through the use of character and anticharacter. (Sá 1984: 114)

Behind all these approaches, which depend on what we compare the work to and on what we consider its central theme, there is an undoubtedly fundamental axis – the destabilization and mutation of fictional identities, which I believe is decisive in both works, though attained by different methods. I will then focus on two techniques used by the authors to convey this effect. One of them is the use of a chain of creations, a *myse-en-abyme* structure or multiplicity of undistinct voices. These voices contradict each other, oppose, react, interrupt, mingle or ally, questioning the authority of fictional entities and the role of art. In *Between the Acts* Miss La Trobe organises a pageant which is played in the gardens of Pointz Hall, a country house in an English rural village. The structure of the novel is very much like the structure of the play. The scenes of the pageant can be read as acts but the events in the framing narrative may function as the acts and the pageant as what comes between them. Both include scraps of verse, bits of conversation, half finished sentences, forgotten lines and words dispersed by the wind. They present disjointed scenes as well as effective lyrical passages. The audience of the play, and the readers of the novel work as a unit through the reference to folk songs, nursery rhymes, literary works, historical events and cultural symbols:

"Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care," she hummed. "Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent..."

The rhyme was "air". She put down her brush. She took up the telephone.

"Three, four, eight, Pyecombe," she said.

"Mrs. Oliver speaking... What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?"

"There to lose what binds us here," she murmured. "Soles. Filled. In time for lunch please," she said aloud. "With a feather, a blue feather... Flying mounting through the air... there to lose what binds us here..." The words weren't worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected. "Abortive," was the word that expressed her.¹

And the beginning of the pageant:

"What luck!" Mrs Carter was saying. "Last year..." Then the play began. Was it or was it not the play? Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily; others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff, the machine buzzed in the bushes. While they looked apprehensively and some finished their sentences, a small girl, like a rosebud in pink, advanced; took her stand on a mat, behind a conch hung with leaves, and piped:

Gentles and simples, I address you all...

So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?

Come hither for our festival (she continued)

This is a pageant, all may see

Drawn from our island history.

England am I...

"She's England," they whispered. "It's begun." "The prologue," they added looking down at the programme.

"England am I," she piped again; and stopped.

She had forgotten her lines.

"Hear! Hear! Said an old man in a white waistcoat briskly.

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"Blast 'em!" cursed Miss La Trobe, hidden behind the tree.²

Um Sopro de Vida uses a similar device to parody the notion of authorship and the question of narrative power within the text. It is divided in introduction and three additional parts. After creating Ângela the narrator/character dialogues with her, sometimes as part of himself, others as an independent individual who is able to write her own book, the so-called "Livro de Ângela – A História das Coisas", which corresponds to the fourth, longest and last section of the novel. In her book Ângela tries to rename the objects about her, freeing herself from her inventor and acquiring an independent life. During this time, the Author constantly evaluates his and her identities, criticizing and trying to understand, in an endless game of hiding and revealing, made of connections and disconnections, all referred to the writing of a book, but enlarging to topics as God, time and death:

Eu queria escrever um livro. Mas onde estão as palavras? (...) Escrevo ou não escrevo? (...) Sou um escritor que tem medo da cilada das palavras. (...) "Escrever" existe por si mesmo? Não. É apenas o reflexo de uma coisa que pergunta. (...) O resultado disso tudo é que vou ter que criar um personagem – mais ou menos como fazem os romancistas, e através da criação dele para conhecer. (...) Escolhi a mim e ao meu personagem – Ângela Pralini – para que talvez através de nós eu possa entender essa falta de definição da vida. (...)

Autor – Porque Ângela é tão novidade e inusitada que eu me assusto. Me assusto em deslumbre e temor diante do seu improviso. Eu a imito? ou ela me imita? Não sei: mas o modo de escrever dela me lembra ferozmente o meu como um filho pode parecer com o pai. Com os pais ancestrais. (...)

Ângela – Quem faz minha vida? Sinto que alguém manda em mim e me destina. Como se alguém me criasse. Mas também sou livre e não obedeço ordens.

Autor – Nessa minha falação e na falação de Ângela, nós dois transcendemos à burguesia que está em nós. O que me desespera é o fato-ideia de que Ângela é ambígua no seu existir: em parte é independente, em parte é a minha mulher escolhida por mim como uma filha eleita. Bem, mas com este livro eu, parece que estou me emancipando.³

These two identities include, therefore, other fictional mutating identities: the author as character, the narrator, the character as an author, the character as the creation of an author (Ângela), the reader to whom the narrator addresses ("Quando acabardes este livro chorai por mim um aleluia. Quando fechardes as últimas páginas deste malogrado e afoito e brincalhão livro de vida então esquecei-me" "Autor – Ângela – se realmente pudesse escrever – noticiaria ideias em bruto por ser incapaz de se dirigir a um leitor possível com a falta espontânea de ordem que usa para escrever este livro. Pensa que o contato com o leitor só se faz através de raciocínio complicado"⁴) and the implied voice of Lispector. This voice is behind the whole construction of the text, because Lispector constantly thematizes her own quests and interrogations. That is what she means when the Author says: "Isto afinal é um diálogo ou um duplo diário?"⁵ Through the biblical image of the creation with a breath, the writer builds one of her paradoxes: the Author, an imaginary being, the result of a voice, lives through the word; Ângela, his creation, is difficult to deal with, shows different developing ways and does not know she is a character. The Author feels he is someone's character.⁶ Woolf's narrator is more traditional than Lispector's but, as happens in other novels and very clearly in the short story "An Unwritten Novel", his presence is in constant flux. Susan Dick and Mary S. Millar point out in the Introduction to the Shakespeare Head Press critical edition that the narrator's voice is not heard when characters are quoted, but may be very audible when the speaking character is described, as happens in the description of Mrs. Haines, the wife of the gentleman farmer. Later, a question of Mrs. Haines will be probably answered by the narrator (or by Bart). This blending of the narrator's voice with the characters also happens when Isa thinks about Rupert Haines. The narrator quotes Isa's thoughts and then tells us about Isa's relationship with Haines, blending her thought with his voice: "She had met him at a Bazaar; and a tennis party. He

had handed her a cup and a racquet – that was all. But in his ravaged face she always felt a mystery; and in his silence passion.”⁷ After this, the narrator quotes Bart who is quoting Byron, and then enters Isa’s mind again. We know, through the blended voices of the narrator and Isa, how she sees herself and Rupert Haines as two swans. (Dick/Millar 2002: xxxv-vi)

In this final book Virginia Woolf creates characters who play characters created by La Trobe, who recreates characters from earlier dramas, who are parodies of historical figures. This history of England ends with ten minutes of present time in which the stage is empty and the audience is “exposed”. The relationship between the audience/characters and the artists/characters in the play is similar to the one between the Author and Ângela in *Sopro de Vida*: they identify and diverge, they enlighten and unmask each other, they disperse and fragment as happens in the final scene of the play with the mirrors and in the mingling of characters in the end, problematising the nature of the frame that separates reality from fiction:

Hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors – all stopped. And the audience saw themselves, not whole by any means, but at any rate sitting still.

(...) So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, here and now. All shifted, preened, minced.

(...) “That’s them,” the back rows were tittering. “Must we submit passively to this malignant indignity?”⁸

The other strategy that both authors use to complement the first one in the frustration of the unifying impulse, the discussion of concepts like truth and reality, is the exploration of discontinuity and a faulting structure. Woolf’s text is more complex and elaborate in this construction, Lispector’s uses, above all, paradox, opposition and ambiguity. In *Between the Acts*, there is no plot and no conclusion; scenes are juxtaposed, images appear and disappear, the break-up of syntax reveals the

fragmentation of a world constantly disintegrating itself. This fracture is disseminated throughout the text with the use of “broken words and broken sentences, parenthetical phrases, thoughts left suspended, sentences left unfinished, bits and pieces of tunes and songs, poems barely murmured and wordlessly understood or misunderstood, frequent literary allusions and quotations, onomatopoeia, the cries of vendors, returning silences and the sounds of nature, the horns of cars, the noise of the gramophone, the din of aeroplanes” (Flora, 2005), blank spaces, ellipses and, of course, the voices of the characters staying in Pointz Hall, the villagers and the characters of the pageant. There is a mixture of various literary discourses, incompatible but contiguously presented, which brings a satirical dimension reinforced by the actors’ change of dresses and identities, and the appearance of their villager identity under the identity of the character they play. Miss La Trobe frequently interferes to give orders or to show her disappointment, the audience makes comments and the whole play is made of these intermissions and gaps as can be seen in scene two of the second part of the pageant after the dialogue between Flavinda and Valentine, when the villagers sing:

Here came Millie Loder (shop assistant at Messrs. Hunt and Dicksons, drapery emporium), in sprigged satin representing Flavinda.

Flav. Seven he said, and there’s the clock word for it. (...) O Valentine, O!

(They embrace)

The clock strikes nine.

“All that fuss about nothing!” a voice exclaimed. People laughed. The voice stopped. But the voice had seen; the voice had heard. For a moment Miss La Trobe behind her tree glowed with glory. The next, turning to the villagers who were passing in and out between the trees, she barked:

“Louder! Louder!”

For the stage was empty; the emotion must be continued; the only thing to continue the emotion was the song; and the words were inaudible.

"Louder! Louder!" She threatened them with her clenched fists.

Digging and delving (they sang), hedging and ditching we pass. ...Summer and winter, autumn and spring return... All passes but we, all changes... but we remain for ever the same... (the breeze blew gaps between their words).

"Louder, louder!" Miss La Trobe vociferated.

Palaces tumble (...)

The words died away. Only a few great names – Babylon, Nineveh, Clymnestra, (...) floated across the open space. Then the wind rose (...) and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came.⁹

In *Um Sopro de Vida*, the multiplicity of voices concentrates in two characters and in the dispersion of the Author's identity. The references to the creation of Ângela, and to her identification with the Author, develop in the first part of the book, giving way to his evaluation of her and her writing, to the recognition of their differences and, finally, to the killing of Ângela, which implies, in a way, a death of part of the Author. The dialogue taking place between the Author and Ângela is not exactly a dialogue, as their sentences are presented in parallel as voices of a text:

Autor – Ângela é muito parecida com o meu contrário. Ter dentro de mim o contrário do que sou é em essência imprescindível. (...)

Autor – Eu e Ângela somos o meu diálogo interior – eu converso comigo mesmo. Estou cansado de pensar as mesmas coisas. (...)

Autor – No sonho do real parece que não sou eu que estou vivendo e sim outra pessoa. Essa outra pessoa é Ângela que é meu sonho acordado.

Estou falando eu ou está falando Ângela? (...)

Ela é um personagem tão autónomo que se interessa por coisas que a mim autor não dizem respeito. Observo-a escrevendo sobre objectos. (...)

Autor – O processo que Ângela tem de escrever é o mesmo processo do ato de sonhar: vão-se formando imagens, cores,

atos, e sobretudo uma atmosfera de sonho (...). Ela não sabe explicar-se. (...)

Autor – Noto com surpresa mas com resignação que Ângela está me comandando. Inclusive escreve melhor do que eu. Agora os nossos modos de falar se entrecruzam e se confundem. (...) Ângela tem um dom que me comove: o dom do erro. Sua vida é toda um engano.¹⁰

As can be seen from this example, the traditional fictional pact based in mimesis is reformulated and transformed in the analysis of the relation between the writer, his texts and his character through the blurring of its divisions and boundaries. The concepts of narrative power, authorship and hierarchy within the text are questioned while pointing to the disturbing dimension of language. As happens in Woolf's novel with the scene of the mirrors, there is here a "mirror effect" in which the Author sees himself, sees the character Ângela, the character Ângela sees herself and sees the Author, mixing fictional categories for which there is no possible identity. The Author feels it when he says he is "um rigoroso pleno de palavras",¹¹ a textual component where the characters are turned into anti-characters. The work becomes, for both writers, the site of a discursive conflict between world and words, where each attempts to give the origin of meaning. The Author in *Sopro de Vida* says "Eu sou apenas esporadicamente. O resto são palavras vazias, elas também esporádicas." or Ângela "Eu queria escrever luxuoso. Usar palavras que rebrilhassem molhadas e fossem peregrinas".¹² Similarly, *Between the Acts* contains numerous passages in which the reader's attention is drawn to the activity of the words themselves, obstructing the referential function of language and diminishing the reality effect. In both texts words frequently call attention not to their literariness, but to their ontological status as "things" in the world, with power to face empirical reality. This is attained with different structures – in *Lispector* as the narrator says "nos solilóquios do escuro irracional",¹³ in Woolf with an excess of intertextual rational

references which end by annulling each other, refusing to communicate anything at all.

Before a disconcerted audience playing their part and the disconcerted performance of the artists, in *Between the Acts* we are led to raise questions about the order of things, the power of illusions, who will occupy the position of reader/ listener/ audience, who can produce art and who can receive it, its function and the opening of new possibilities for narrative discourse. The role of the author is questioned when Miss La Trobe is presented between conflicted schemes of presence and absence and in the final disoriented words of Reverend Stretfield. In the same way, the Author in *Um Sopro de Vida*, addressing the reader in the beginning of the book, through a dialectic of opposites, explains:

Eu sei que este livro não é fácil (...). Ao escrevê-lo não me conheço, eu me esqueço de mim. Eu que apareço neste livro não sou eu. (...) Eu sou vós mesmos. Tirei deste livro apenas o que me interessava – deixei de lado minha história e a história de Ângela. O que me importa são instantâneos fotográficos das sensações.¹⁴

The questioning of fictional identities is, therefore, central in both texts. Their structure illustrates the Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and dialogism and one of their main themes is the structuring and restructuring of social and personal history. Together with the use of irony and humour, the parody of social context, the use of intertextuality and metafiction, the exploration of fragment and of discontinuity, the development of self reflection and the interrogation of the author before the condition of his work, the focusing on the presence of a reader lost in the interpretation of the text, this problematisation of fictional identities places these two novels, borrowing Marlow Miller's words, between the acts of modernism and postmodernism. <<

NOTES

[1] V. Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. Susan Dick and Mary S. Millar, Shakespeare Head Press Edition, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, 9. All the quotations of the novel refer to this edition, which will be henceforth referred as BA.

[2] BA 42.

[3] Clarice Lispector, *Um Sopro de Vida (Pulsões)*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Fronteira, 1988, 12-14; 18; 101; 125; 109. All the quotations of the novel refer to this edition, which will be henceforth referred as SV.

[4] SV, 20 and 116.

[5] SV 32.

[6] SV 26.

[7] BA 4.

[8] BA 99-100.

[9] BA 75.

[10] SV 42, 59, 82, 99, 114, 120 and 131.

[11] SV 36.

[12] SV, 87 and 110.

[13] SV 20.

[14] SV 19.

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